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Overcoming The Girl Tutor Complex: Gender Differences in the Writing Center

[Spring 2008 / Consulting](#)

by **Samantha Mudd**, *Western Kentucky University*

Gender considerations in consultations



Samantha Mudd

Before beginning my job as a tutor at **Western Kentucky University's Writing Center**, I worried about issues that I would later learn were common to first-time tutors: Would I have the ability and the knowledge to help students with their writing? I knew that writing centers typically employed graduate students, and being an undergraduate, I was reasonably uncertain of my capabilities. I had minimal experience tutoring peers, let alone ESL students. Despite my insecurities, I quickly found that students were generally willing to take my advice and work with me. Clearly, by making a session a collaborative effort, both the student and I experience mutual learning. Looking back, I've realized that my co-workers had similar concerns and that we were learning together. However, despite all of us being "in the same boat," there was one dividing factor between us—gender.

Being the only female tutor at my assigned campus location, I noted both negative and positive factors that contributed to sessions due to my gender. Although most students have no gender preference for their tutor, I've had many female students acknowledge that they are more comfortable working with another woman. One student, "Julie," had scheduled an appointment with me to revise her English 100 paper. It took a while for her to become comfortable. In fact, when I first began to read her paper aloud, Julie slapped

her hands against her head, covering her face, and said "Oh no, I'm so embarrassed." Once I reassured her, she began to open up and was much more responsive to both criticism and casual conversation. However, as soon as a male tutor entered the room, she shut down. I had not even considered the idea that the presence of a male (or in other cases, that of a female) could have such an impact on the tutor-student dynamic.

The issue of gender equality is something that some (but definitely not all) ESL students consider during the tutoring sessions.

In a later session, Julie revealed that her shift in attitude was due to what she identified as that specific tutor's "personality." She did not like the way a previous session with him had gone; she reported that he dominated the session and she liked our sessions because she felt that she and I were "on the same level." Julie valued a friendlier, less "business-like" atmosphere. Over time, I learned to evoke response in Julie by relating whatever issue we were discussing to something that may occur in her life—she was recently engaged and hardly interested in her English 100 class. So, while Julie understood semi-colons as being "a marriage between a comma and a period," she may have had a harder time understanding a semi-colon's function by a more formal definition. The difference between my joking analogy and a denoted definition is not that the analogy pertains to marriage (this is not 1940). Instead, the more casual definition enhanced the comfortable, informal tone of the session, something that Julie felt was easier to accomplish with another woman. I realized that it was not necessarily a clash of personalities that prevented Julie from identifying with the other tutor. It was more of a clash of gender-specific values, as she grew less responsive every time any male tutor entered the writing center. Considering Julie's upbringing in a small town, of which she frequently spoke negatively, her resulting notions of male dominance hindered her ability to collaborate with men. A male tutor would not have been able to connect with Julie on this level because of her past experience with either male dominance in an educational setting or collaboration with other females. This suggests some kind of underlying authority issue in Julie's earlier education, where males may be considered dominant correctors and females appear as nurturing tutors. This is hypothetical of course, but patriarchal undertows still exist in many aspects of American culture and have equally strong affects on male and female students.

In other cases, I have found that some students view a female tutor as less authoritative or qualified. Often times male ESL students carry their cultural notions of gender into the writing center and consider me inferior to my male co-workers. Not understanding that tutoring sessions in the writing center are a collaborative effort, these men often feel uncomfortable being what they consider submissive to a female tutor. Those that are uncomfortable working with the opposite sex, but schedule appointments with me despite my gender, have often found creative ways to remind me that, in their culture, men are dominant. For instance, during our first meeting, a Saudi-Arabian student, "Abdul," prefaced the content of his work with a disclaimer. "In my country women are not viewed as equal to men. But don't worry, I don't think this way," he assured me. We proceeded with what I considered a very productive session. On the other hand, a Japanese student, "Haruto," was very courteous during our session, but was uncomfortable sitting side by side and wanted to make sure that I was confident in my recommendations. At the end of our

session, he thanked me and noted that he would be sure to ask his male roommate about the topics we discussed. Although these instances both illustrate opposite cultural responses to working with a member of the opposite sex, I feel that both students took a big step in reconciling contrasted ideas of the culture in which they grew up and the culture in which they now live (and learn). Abdul seemed to be confessing his new outlook on gender to not only me, but himself. Haruto, although still strong in his cultural beliefs, was courteous and thankful for the help he received. The issue of gender equality is something that some (but definitely not all) ESL students consider during the tutoring sessions.

All in all, being the only female tutor at my assigned lab location has taught me to adapt to the needs of students more appropriately.

Another group of students—those who are required to go to the writing center—often have a less-than-enthused mentality and are looking for a tutor who will go easy on them. Of course, we, as writing tutors, seem to be imagined into overly-critical authorities whose writing is so superior to that of other students that we nobly laugh at their substandard attempts at literacy. Needless to say, this is not true, but with this idea in mind, some students think the gender of the tutor dominates the session more than the content of the work itself. On one occasion, I have worked with a male student, “Mark,” whose ideas regarding women made it difficult for me to work with him. His professor had suggested he go to the writing center to work on the content of his assignment. After scheduling his first appointment, he made it clear that he would have preferred to work with a male, but his schedule only permitted a time slot with me. “You might be offended,” he said as I began reading the paper. He was right; he frequently used the term “feminist” to suggest a negative characteristic or belief. When I pointed out the potentially offensive nature of his work, he attempted to gain a sense of control over the session by further demeaning the idea of gender equality. He felt that I (and his professor) was offended by his remarks only because I was a female and that a male professor, or a male tutor, would be “less harsh” on him in this respect. However, the same issue was brought up during his next session, this time with a male tutor. Seeing as how gender differences had never been an integral element between tutors in our writing center, it was more than reassuring to hear that my co-worker was equally adamant in this situation.

All in all, being the only female tutor at my assigned lab location has taught me to adapt to the needs of students more appropriately. I recognize that all students are not comfortable with inter-gender tutoring sessions and while some may be taking strides to overcome their preconceived notions of gender, others may need the influence of a member of their same sex. My biggest goal in tutoring students is to assure an open, comfortable learning environment and whether or not this is a feminine trait, I hope students appreciate and benefit from this quality in “the girl tutor.”

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